Developmental Disabilities

WHAT IS THE PUBLIC HEALTH PROBLEM?

Developmental disabilities are a diverse group of conditions characterized by physical, cognitive, psychological, sensory, and speech impairments that begin anytime during the developmental period (from birth through age 18 years). In most cases (approximately 75%), the cause of the disability is not known. Approximately 17% of children in the United States less than 18 years of age have a developmental disability, and approximately 1.4 million children (2% of U.S. school-aged children) have a serious developmental disability (e.g., mental retardation, cerebral palsy, or epilepsy), which often requires lifelong supportive services. State and federal education departments collectively spend approximately $36 billion each year on special education programs for children and young adults aged 3–21 years with developmental disabilities.

WHAT HAS CDC ACCOMPLISHED?

- Started the Metropolitan Atlanta Developmental Disabilities Surveillance Program (MADDSP)--one of the few programs in the world that conducts active, ongoing monitoring of children affected by any of the five developmental disabilities in a large, racially diverse metropolitan area--to monitor the number of children aged 3–10 years living in the metropolitan Atlanta area who have one or more of the following conditions: mental retardation, cerebral palsy, hearing loss, and vision impairment (autism spectrum disorders added in 1998).
- Through MADDSP, have provided opportunities for special studies to identify risk factors for these disabilities (e.g., studies on the underlying causes of vision impairment, age of diagnosis and causes of congenital hearing loss, and the relationship between prenatal magnesium sulfate exposure and cerebral palsy).
- Conducted a study to determine the outcomes of children identified with developmental disabilities as they reach young adulthood by applying epidemiologic methods to disability research.
- Studied the developmental status of children who screen positive for and are diagnosed with a metabolic disorder to evaluate the impact of newborn metabolic screening; the study showed that screening programs appear to be preventing the mental retardation associated with metabolic disorders.
- Awarded funding to two sites for kernicterus research and prevention activities.

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

- Continue to use the MADDSP database to study trends in prevalence and to look for possible causes of developmental disabilities.
- Continue to develop new data sources for monitoring the prevalence of developmental disabilities.
- Finalize plans to conduct an autism validation study and share lessons learned with state and other partners.
- Continue to work with state partners and the U.S. Department of Education to gain access to health information in educational records for public health tracking activities.

For further information about this or other CDC programs, visit www.cdc.gov/programs *February 2003*